

Church is Offensive

What makes the Church so hard to be a part of? I would say it's not so much the time commitment or the social pressures or even the code of conduct that makes the Church so insufferable, although these might be some of the superficial reasons given for not attending. No, the difficulty with the Church is found in the very *Calling* itself. The Church calls us to a life that is not of our own choosing. And this is very difficult for us to accept. The reason for this is simple: symbols and images are constantly being paraded before our eyes teaching us the exact opposite; encouraging us to be ourselves, to celebrate our differences, and, if needs be, to demand public recognition for our unique identities. But lest we sit here and blame society for our shameful state, let us assume our own share of the responsibility. You see, we are not just passive bystanders. We ourselves buy into the hype and contribute to the narrative that to accept ourselves for who we are is the only way to true freedom and self-expression. Like Dr. Frankenstein, it is we who have created this monster and now must witness our monster turn on us. But then we come to Church and we hear something totally different. God does not celebrate us like the world does. He points out the fundamental flaws with our thinking. Our consciences rebel against this judgmental assessment. We desperately want to be recognized, cherished and prized for who we are, but God outright refuses to pander to us.

The Church will always be offensive because Christ is offensive. Even the imagery used by Christ this morning has the potential to offend our delicate sensibilities. Christ says He is the Vine and we are the branches. Seems innocent enough until you really think about all the ins and outs of the metaphor. We are the branches, and what that really means is we are derivative. The vine is the central life force of the plant, the branches are only a byproduct, a mere extension of the vine. The vine contains all the vitality, the branches simply live off the goodness of the vine

itself. Apart from the vine, the branches live a rootless existence, tied to nothing and fated to wither and die. Well if that's not offensive I don't know what is. No one wants to be derivative. We want to be independent and self-sustaining. We want to be our own enclosed ecological system. We don't want to be at the mercy of the Vine. We want to live freely. We don't want to be dependent on someone or be in someone's debt.

This will always be the radical offense of the Gospel. But why does Christ describe us this way? Why can't we exist apart from Him? The idea behind an independent, self-guiding identity is the presupposition that we know who we are and where we are going. But the history of humanity doesn't support this optimistic view. We are a bundle of conflicting ideologies, emotions and desires, each one existing in a state of antagonism against all the rest. The predominant thought of our culture today is that we are by nature independent and rational and so we can take care of governing ourselves; that is if people were simply left to themselves to calculate what was in their own self-interest and acted accordingly each person's self-interest would balance the others out. This type of rational egoism is dangerous though. Because we are not rational, we are very irrational. We don't know what's in our best interest and we often desire that which is harmful to us. We want happiness but we have a special talent for making ourselves miserable. This of course is not a flattering picture of ourselves, but any amount of introspection and self-reflection proves its validity. The hardest thing is to know yourself—the good, the bad, the ugly. But facing ourselves and confronting our inner demons is a sobering task. Many refuse to do it opting instead to accept rather than change. This is also one of the main reasons for why we have created such a plastic world to validate our existence, and it's so convincing that we have fooled ourselves with it.

Christ comes to set us free from all of this. Freedom in Christ means going against the comfortable predictability of life and daring to confront the world and ourselves as it actually is. The Vine-Branch metaphor ceases to be problematic when we live in repentance. For repentance is that very humble confession that we do not know who we are apart from our sinful desires. Abiding in Christ becomes a comfort when, and only when, we reach this heightened state of self-awareness. And then, Christ as the Vine is liberating. Christ liberates us from our slavish rationality. The world leaves you alone. God pesters. The world accepts your laziness. God demands sees in you something more. The world lets you be. But God is not interested in letting you be. He is more interested in what you can *become*. This is why even though the message of the Church sounds offensive it is in fact a positive message for it's the only hope we've got. God has set a course for us, which does not leave us in a state of being but challenges us with becoming. We can never grow if we settle, and the only way to grow is by God prompting us forward by grace through faith. By way of this challenge, we come to understand our obsession to create some type of utopian paradise here on earth as nothing more than our wanting to stay put in our static existence. God challenges us with a higher purpose. A higher aim. A higher reach as we are grafted like branches into a Vine growing upwards into the eternal glories of God Himself. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H Mills